

On Anachronism as Dissent

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There are many kinds of Philistines in this variegated world; and like fish, military vehicles, and ideas, they cannot all be killed in the same way. There are also many *degrees* of philistinism; but a lesser Philistine might, in the end, be more dangerous than a greater one. The complete Philistine merely sops up the excrement from the various entertainment industries with hiser well-fed lip, and in so doing, let us say, prevents it from spilling onto the floor. One could even posit that *such* a Philistine has simply reached the obvious and inescapable conclusion that high 'Art' *as such* has long since lost any vestige of real social value, having turned itself into a clown dancing for the table-scraps of the trendy upper bourgeoisie; yet what of that most insidious breed, the *Philistine artist*? Or opening up and redefining that capitalised word, the *Philistine intellectual*? If we recoil from the (admittedly) complete trash being read, watched, listened to, and regurgitated by both the exploiting and the exploited classes in industrialised societies, where might we look for salvation? We *might* (for instance) turn to the opposite pole, to self-discursive art (which still has the audacity to call itself “fine”); but, as I have pointed out in many other essays, we find here, in the position of canonical power, merely fourth generation “Post-”Modernism, the ultimate smokescreen for a subculture founded upon gross ethical irresponsibility, an entire “artistic” world *based* on the principles of philistine ignorance of the potentialities, and consequent duties, of the creative project. Like the most entrenched of Philistines, these vermin trade upon the ghost of the truism that art-making realises or attempts the 'best that humanity can offer', whilst in the next breath speaking of it as a “profession;” in short, as something contained by, and contingent upon, their individual lives and whatever level of comfort seems comfortable to consider reasonable. My published invectives against this type are piling up rapidly, and so let me simply affirm that yes, in this essay, as in so many others, the (Post)Modernist writertheoristartisthipst-

ercomposer, s/he who *should know better*, who is *actively engaged in shitting upon what intellectual culture should be*, in preventing it from conceiving of its potential or fulfilling its social obligations; and who is the best argument any Philistine, let alone *any decent person*, could require for a dismissal of *all* creative and intellectual communities as mere sub-cultures of egotistical back-scratching and empty words, entertaining and distracting the more infantile sons and daughters of the upper middle class; this person is the target of my implacable hatred. This having been made clear, let us move on.

Now, you may have noted, dear reader, that I have employed the term “Philistine” as the verbal lynchpin of the opening paragraph of this essay. When was the last time you heard this word? My guess is that, unless it was in a Post-NeoAbsurdist or other marginal work, it was in a text written before the fist of *simplistic* relativism closed its grip around the shrivelled testicles and withered ovaries of the dominant 'creative' community and through them, their patrons and target audience: the ruling corporate class. The word “Philistine” thus appears on the stage of our essay as the walking corpse of an opponent who was killed long ago by the shining sword of “post-”modernism. The “post-”modernist experiences this appearance as an intrusion from the past, that “history” which, because it has been declared ended, is all the more threatening when it refuses to stay in its grave as a receptacle of bones which “post-”modernists can plunder at will to compensate for their own insipid lack of either rigour or integrity. The word will elicit charges of elitism, of archaism, of closed-mindedness, of naive nostalgia; I am willing to accept these charges, if only to glimpse, behind this blast of nervous epithets, the spectacle of the “Post-”Modernist body, shivering, naked of any convictions of its own, and terrified to allow them to anyone else. Only by engaging with the concept of the Philistine can I assure that I do not become one myself.

Could I not use a different word? Of course. But it would not so upset the “Post-”Modernist sheep; for it would not be a walking corpse. And while the Philistine is the enemy *against* whom this essay is directed, the essay’s *subject* is the walking corpse- in the guise of a word, a figure, a system of belief, a discourse, a tradition, a medium of communication, or an idea. If I may be excused for resurrecting an early 19th Century work, the Red Death might be seen as a figure for this kind of retribution from the ideology, tradition, and/or canon from the past which has been repressed, denied by a Philistine cabal so busy eating appetizers and idiotically spitting out disconnected and meaningless chunks of jargon.

Such a set of degenerate capitalist-apologists have been proclaimed as the vanguard of creative action for the past 60 years (particularly in America); like Ubu in his cave of refuge, they have clawed their way to the top through a combination of dishonesty and (artistic) murder, and in their twilight sleep they are beset with the fear of those they have discretely murdered. For this reason, they have proclaimed the Death of History: all competing movements, currents, traditions, and conceptual systems are nothing now but bones and gristle--either written out of the academic histories, or assimilated into the (essentially meaningless) soup of “Modernism” itself). And “Post-”Modernism as a theoretical edifice has become so indolent and self-assured that it half-capitulates to its own proclamations, as do its half-literate quasi-adherents.

Of the many (unacknowledged) dogmatic assertions of “Post-”Modernism, a number of which I have treated at length elsewhere, the End of History is one of the most prevalent; and it is one which plays a vital role in perpetuating the lie that “Post-”Modernism represents “the current state of *the arts*,” and that there is by implication no challenge to it by any but reactionary and anti-intellectual parties. What has been committed over the past fifty years (at least) is a campaign of

Historiographic assassinations. History-making, its inherent problematics and politics, is simply not discussed, is never brought up, and the average university graduate or 'art student' develops a deep-seated and well-cultivated blindspot, one whose consequences are essentially ethical. This blindspot is maintained by a discourse and an industry perfectly adapted to exploit their insecurities. In the arts, this absence of historiography from the discourse which is nearly everyone's initiation into thinking about creative activity is also among the least acknowledged devices of the "Post-"Modernist power structure and the Academy (for it is *still* "the Academy," now distributed across a thousand identical institutions throughout the Western world) that supports it. This is the reason for the horribly misbegotten abortion that passes for "Art History" in today's artist-factories. Art History programmes overwhelmingly treat the first five thousand years or so of human creative endeavour as somehow slightly less important in its entirety than what has happened in the last fifty years;¹ and any serious consideration of "traditional art" (i.e., everything ever produced between the first cave paintings and either Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol, depending on the institution) is generally curtailed by an inexplicable fetish around figurative representation, as if no other issue existed in artistic discourse prior to Cezanne.² (This, I may add in passing, is in large part why so many self-described "traditionalists" base their programme upon a stupid platform of anti-intellectualism, saying "hey, if it

¹ Though I have less direct experience with other disciplines and therefore concentrate my argument on this (relatively inconsequential) field of activity, I suspect that analogous problems exist, to varying degrees, in many other pedagogical pigeonholes as well.

² For a larger, contextualizing discussion of "Post-"Modernism's mechanizations of ideological control, and of their mechanisms for creating an illusion of ideological freedom or heterodoxy, see my *Seek and Destroy: Modernist strategies for the Suppression of Anti-Art and Cheating Art History: Strategies in the Fight Against Modernism*. These essays and others put forth my argument that "Post-"Modernism is in fact merely an attenuated Modernism drained of all vitality, rather than a transcendence, conquest, deconstruction, or working-through of Modernism.

was good enough for Rembrandt, it's good enough for me!" Well, it wasn't, it's not, and go take a fucking snapshot or else learn how to think *through* painting, rather than paint *instead* of thinking.)³

On a relatively local level, this allows artistwriterchoreographermusicians, whether working in traditional or experimental modes, or anything outside or in-between, to remain blissfully incompetent and ignorant of a huge proportion of the potential significance (and consequences) of their work. If ideas, impulses, techniques, themes, or artistic languages which had prominence prior to 1945 are addressed at all, they are addressed only as dead things which can be employed with complete irresponsibility, but are *inherently* beyond the pale of any real personal (or relevant) engagement.

The refusal to sensitively engage with ideas, forms, discourses, techniques, or themes not of the officially sanctioned "current milieu" supports the calcification and continued dominance of the status quo. It prevents us from translating the processes, experiences, and yields of 99% of Western thought (not to speak of humanity at large) into a contemporary context and using it as a catalyst for the continued vitality of the human project. Instead, all of this experience and these ideas are denied a chance for continued growth, metamorphosis, re-consideration, or recontextualization, and instead represent merely one vast corpse waiting to be raped by every ignorant "Post-"Modernist who wants to spice up hiser uninformed appropriated text⁴ or sophomorically executed painting with a bit of quasi-historical and necrophiliac "irony" to make the critics chuckle as they slap on a price tag.

³Again, similar problems are at play in other disciplines; the fact that I here cite examples from the visual arts does not in the least let others off the hook. The visual arts simply present themselves as a particularly grotesque and shameless example.

⁴It is, obviously, the "uninformed" that poses a problem here, not the "appropriation".

(i.e.,) Thus, these anachronistic stances- not currently intellectualartistically fashionable, and not taught in the academies as *ideas* but, if at all, as *history*- are positioned by the dominant discourse as something somehow beyond all recourse, as *definitively* outside and beyond any possible contemporary experience or (re)utilization. If the immediate social circumstances surrounding the emergence or dominance of an idea, tradition, medium, or technique has changed, the silent argument implicitly runs, then it has, by this very fact, been rendered impotent, incapable of being engaged with, further developed, or reconfigured *as an idea*. It may, of course, be plundered for pastiche and irony, but it may be approached only when it has been run through “Post-”Modernism’s alembic which turns all gold to shit and every radical or creative urge to a pecuniary spasm of sophomoric quasi-theorizing. A dead idea must not be reinvented.

The result is that the dominant artistic discourse is characterized by an “Olden Times” syndrome, in which all of these excluded ideas and modes are treated as a homogenized mass that is more or less undifferentiable by any but the most pedantic scholars, and in which any *specific* or detailed engagement is seen as pointless and nostalgic nit-picking:

In the Olden Times, people just didn’t know as much about art, language, and music as they do now. They just wanted things to be pretty, because they hadn’t (mis)read Baudrillard yet. They did okay back then, you know, in the olden times, when the philosophers believed in god, and the poets wrote *about* stuff, and they made paintings look *like* stuff and used melody. But now we’re in the present day, and we *know* what’s going on.

Who wrote first, Baudelaire or Byron? Who came first, Watteau or Goya? Which century did Bach work in again? The average academy-trained artist today has approximately the same understanding of Art

History as the average American high school student of National History, who cannot recall whether the Civil War preceded or followed the Mexican War, is uncertain which century the First World War occurred in, and doesn't see what it matters anyway, because it was a long time ago, and hey, we've moved on. Now let's go start more wars!⁵ The fact that theoretical, political, metaphysical, artistic, and scientific discourses have utilized different critical languages in different situations, and that different sets of concerns have been thrust into the critical limelight is somehow presented as proof of a positivist, evolutionary model of intellectual and creative endeavour that "Post-"Modernism *claims* to be "beyond" but in fact uses as a bulwark for its continued positivist, phallogocentric ideological control. In a world without History, change cannot be thought.

The result is that when and *if* the vast majority of artists, activists, and supposed thinkers contextualize their projects in relation to the total human apparatus, they have the capacity to situate it only in relation to current or incredibly recent production. The "Post-"modernist conception of what is possible and thinkable in human endeavour has all the scope and understanding of a mole's. It allows artists to think about art in petty and inconsequential terms (whatever their pretensions about a 'social critique' making galleries, publishers, label executives, and a few artists fat with cash and credit, whilst assuaging the consciences of the young capitalist elite perpetuating the imperialist system), because the creative project is seen as something so weak as to be incapable of transgressing generations. The very *idea* of the creative drive as something too great to be encapsulated within a single life or achieved by a single generation is eliminated. Again, the mainstream artistic milieu is simply symptomatic of

⁵ It must be stressed that this overarching awareness is as vital to radical and experimental practice as to any other; Derrida is continually engaged in an ongoing battle with Plato, Leftwich or Kervinen continue and transfigure a tradition rooted in pictographic alphabetical systems and magical inscription, etc.

a more widespread intellectual malady: What is unachievable in a generation is unachievable per se, and the unachievable *as such* is denied a utopic value.⁶

Speculative intellectual communities become academic *departments*, churning out pointless, safe, and generally self-evident and insipid babble in order to chalk up resumé points and secure tenure. Artistic and literary communities are reduced to mere “scenes,” encouraging artists to give in without reflection or guilt to the spectre of consumerist “professionalism,” drifting aimlessly but lucratively (if only hypothetically: the status accorded the “Established” or even “Up-and-Coming Young Artist” is the real currency for which these artists jump) from gallery to gallery, label to label, or publisher to publisher; the canonical systems, discourses, and institutional structures which characterize and regulate the relationship of creative production to society *and to itself* are seen as a given, since any change would take more than a generation to bring to fruition. And since the creative project is, in a self-fulfilling prophesy, not seen as important enough to entail any real ethical responsibility on the part of the artist regarding its future (any sense of artistic continuity being done away with), artists opt instead to “fit in” to the “current scene,” since to do otherwise

⁶ It should be understood that this is not a Positivist complaint, though it can only be worded in such a way that many reactionaries might too hastily applaud. The productive and ontological absence that rigorous nihilism or post-structuralism calls upon—I think here of Kristeva, Derrida, Lacan, Bataille, but might as easily mention Gorgias of Leontini or Dionysus the Aeropagite—is infused with an *ethical motive* and is presented as a mode of thinking to be navigated and harnessed as an agent for radical change. “Post-”Modernism has removed the ethical imperative, discarded the nuances and articulations which *are the flesh* of this form of thought, and simply waves the flayed skin of post-structuralism in the air as a vague justification for the complicity and self-satisfaction of its practitioners and drones. In a world without stable value, the ethical nihilist or post-structuralist creates and trans-substantiates values; in a world without stable value, the “Post-”Modernist becomes the shameless lap-dog of the ruling class.

“would get them nowhere.” These controlling or mediating structures are not approached as something to be developed and moulded *by* artists, let alone turned into tools for for positive social intervention or weapons against the spectacular infrastructure of the capitalist state; but as something essentially frivolous though 'edgy' for artists to force themselves *into*. And so the state of the creative project remains its its mire, and these small-minded vermin continue sucking the curdled phynancial milk from the system's teats.

Anachronism disrupts the calm, apparently homogenous surface of the “Post-”Modernist misrepresentation of the *present*. It represents an insistence that ideas outside the current norm of dominant discourse can still have value and warrant re-evaluation. For *no* anachronistic idea is in fact “from the past;” only the period of that idea's strongest sway over mainstream discourse. And while this gesture does not of necessity compel *agreement*, this is in no way its goal; when the goal is homogenized *agreement*, the idea becomes reactionary. Rather, the anachronistic gesture is an *incontrovertible* statement that this idea IS THINKABLE. It is STILL up for debate. It must be dealt with. Better: it presents itself *not* as an idea but as an active and wilful engagement with a *project* that such a gesture or idea could never claim to encompass. The anachronistic gesture insists that the values, goals, languages, and structuration of intellectual activity are matters of active choice, and have more to do with either conviction or play (or something other) than with chronological hierarchies. It disrupts the tyranny of the *ideological* status quo, and denies that constant, *blind* innovation is the only acceptable (or thinkable) mode of change.

Even constant dissent for its own sake, of which this author, needless to say, is an ardent partisan, and which by its very nature has no *ideology*, DOES have a tradition: or more pointedly, *countless* traditions. Even in the modes, strategies, and rhetorics in which they enacted this very rejection,

there is a silence which, construed in an intelligent way and factored as a structural element, references and transmits the tradition *of* such rejections of tradition ranging from the Heretics to the Hermetics to the Romantics to the Symbolists to the Futurists to the Lettrists to the Situationists to the Neoists, to name a few, and to sketch only one such trajectory. All of these movements, furthermore, have been or are thoroughly and rigorously *aware* of what is being rejected, and the act of rejection therefore takes on a venom and an operational intelligence which is utterly foreign to those passively or confusedly rejecting what does not, for them, exist in the first place in any real sense. Any attempt to ignore *in fact* and not merely in rhetoric (which is, of course, quite another thing altogether) the *reality* or relevance of prior discourse merely acts to assure half-assed artists or writers, through their own ignorance, that their puerile attempts to “push the envelope” are not mere hair-brained and grotesque repetitions of the projects of far more adventurous, passionate, and *committed* workers who have inherited, known, and left an enemy as a legacy.

If any question yet remains of why a partisan of the avant-garde (be it alive or dead) is implicitly championing Dürer, Villon, and Erasmus, let me be MORE explicit: ANACHRONISM IS A BLOW AGAINST HISTORY. It refuses to abide by the chronological organization of human thought. History, which has become a fetish within the very system that has declared it Ended, has become a mechanism for the exclusion and shutting-up of ideas not conducive to the Museumpublishingallery racket or the economic and political systems for which it is a prop and a hypocritical apology.

Nor is its relevance confined to that of an anti-institutional gesture. For I have already misspoken: if instead of seeing anachronism as an active *gesture* we see it, as “Post-”Modernism would have it, as a displaced *thing* which is out of its proper historical moment, then *the anachronism does not*

exist. For ideas, languages, traditions, *themselves* do not exist. Sweeping aside the spectre of Plato, let me point out that there can be no boundary between an idea and its context. Whichever idea we set forward or align ourselves with, its very nature *as* anachronism reveals (in fact this might be seen as a working *definition* of anachronism) that it is in fact only a partial idea, ripped from its intellectual, historical, and political context (inasmuch as we are willing to recognize such an ideal form *of* the Idea) along some arbitrary seam or other, and grafted, whether delicately or awkwardly, fantastically or menacingly, into the fabric of the “present.” *These seams, upon the edges of which one could draw blood, are where the true creative and disruptive work of this anachronistic operation take place.* The anachronistic gesture, *if intelligently employed,* can not be *other* than a catalyst for change, one weapon of dissent in the hands of those demanding to move FORWARD.



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